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ABSTRACT

While research papers may hold unique challenges for all writers, they are especially daunting for "less experienced" writers because these students often come to college without ever having written a research paper. A study examined several research papers written by students who took part in the Summer Bridge program at California State University at Los Angeles which is designed to help students who are conditionally admitted to the university. A subset of 25 portfolios was selected randomly from among all that year's Summer Bridge portfolios, but with about the same numbers of portfolios from males and females and the university's ethnic composition reflected in the selection. Of the 25 read initially, 5 were chosen to analyze in depth. This paper discusses in detail two of those five, finding that some form of "patchwriting" was used in all five of the research papers studied. The paper explains that "patchwriting" is considered by some scholars as a stage of writing development in which students are exploring different ideas but have not absorbed them thoroughly enough to put them into their own words. It notes that it is helpful for many students to use this technique as they start writing at the college level in order to try to understand what the authors of their texts believe and to begin to take on the language of the discourse community. The paper concludes that students need their instructors' help to learn how to respond in ways that keep them from being susceptible to accusations of plagiarism. (NKA)

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The Writer and the Text: Basic Writers, Research Papers and Plagiarism.

by

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The Writer and the Text: Basic Writers, Research Papers and Plagiarism

As composition instructors, we ask our students not only to write, but also to incorporate text into their essays in meaningful ways. But students vary in their interpretations of, and their responses to, this instruction. Someone who has had little experience using outside text in her essay must learn how to incorporate text meaningfully. In this context, a fundamental consideration is the very idea of text incorporation itself. One of the most difficult ways instructors ask their students to incorporate text is in the research paper. While research papers may hold unique challenges for all writers, they are especially daunting for "less experienced" writers because these students often come to college without ever having written a research paper.

In order to look at these issues I chose to study several research papers written by students who took part in the Summer Bridge program at California State University at Los Angeles (CSULA) which is designed to help students who are conditionally admitted to the university. Summer Bridge was particularly appropriate for the purposes of this study because, unlike most developmental writing courses, this course requires students to write a research paper.

A subset of 25 portfolios was selected randomly from among all that year's Summer Bridge portfolios with the following constraints: an attempt was made to have about the same numbers of portfolios from males and females, and to reflect the ethnic composition of CSULA. Portfolios also were selected so that the subset would contain the range of scores students

received in Summer Bridge. Of the twenty-five portfolios read initially, I chose five to analyze in depth and will discuss two of those this morning.

Analyzing these student papers intensified many of the concerns I had previously held about the challenges inherent in research paper assignments. The research paper is particularly difficult for basic writers because before students even face the task of writing, they must find materials their instructor and readers consider suitable for a topic with which the student is unfamiliar. After students have chosen the texts they will incorporate into their essays, they must find something to say about a topic that may be new or even taboo to them. They must often reconcile the beliefs they, their families, or cultures have held to the new ideas brought forward in their readings and engage in argumentation. This leads to another problem facing students--they are expected to create an original text that is free from the appearance of plagiarism. This means that students must be in control of such conventions as quoting and paraphrasing. These are not skills that most basic writing students possess as they enter the university. To complicate matters, often the climate at the university is one of suspicion and blame, when it comes to any appearance of plagiarism, instead of one that encourages risk taking and growth among its students. Therefore many of the strategies students have used in the past in order to incorporate a difficult text are not only are inappropriate in the university, but could lead to accusations of plagiarism. I've skimmed over several important issues very quickly, but my point here is to emphasize that the challenge of bringing in and successfully incorporating outside authorities can be overwhelming for our students. When making research paper assignments, many instructors assume that students will be able to create an original text in which they are in clear command of the material. However, when a writer attempts to adapt or apply what she has read to a given topic, according to M. M. Bakhtin, she is working with a

"heteroglossia," or a multitude of different voices at once, he goes as far as to claim that "[o]nly the mythical Adam …could really have escaped from start to finish this dialogic inter-orientation with the alien word that occurs in the object" ("Discourse in the Novel" 279).

In order for students to incorporate these "alien" words and ideas of others into their essays, they are expected to master the conventions of the quotation and the paraphrase. Although basic writing students have been using the words of others their entire lives, they are rarely familiar with the rules that govern that use as they enter the university. Indeed, quite often the students seemed to be confused about the amount of change from the original text needed for their writing to qualify as a paraphrase. According to Elaine Whitaker, in "A Pedagogy to Address Plagiarism," writing a paraphrase involves "a process of totally internalizing an idea before putting it into one's own words" (510). "Totally internalizing" an idea before quoting may be reasonable advice but it is an incredibly difficult task for may writer in light of the concept of heteroglossia. These writers must balance and show mastery of words and ideas they do not yet understand and what often results is a cacophony.

The following example illustrates the challenge of this task. In this excerpt from her Discussion Section, Jamila is working toward a definition of racial discrimination. Because she cites a page number, uses no punctuation to imply this is a quotation, and changes the word order and form from her source, one could assume that what follows is a paraphrase.

> All racial forms of discrimination, are espoused by the United Nations, stating that our term racial discrimination applies to: any exclusions, restrictions, distinctions, based on race, color, nationality or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying, enjoying or exercising, on an equal footing of human rights and freedoms in the field of public life, on the focus on

> discrimination against indigenous peoples, states Van Dyke in his book "Human Rights, Ethnicity and Discrimination," (p.5). (Jamila 3)

It is helpful to compare Jamila's version to the original, which reads as follows:

> The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, sponsored by the United Nations, says that the term racial discrimination applies to "any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life." (Van Dyke 5)

Comparison of Jamila's paraphrase to the original text reveals that she is new to this discourse community and therefore she has not really internalized the voice coming from her source. Although Jamila does attribute the definition to Van Dyke, she does not yet understand her source and she misinterprets it. Jamila's paper drives home the point that to incorporate an essay or article written by another writer into one's research paper requires not only that a student understand the words the author is using, but also that she must move beyond those words to make room for the new ideas within her own understanding of the world. So, while Jamila has been given some instruction on how to construct a paraphrase (change form and order of words from the original) this paraphrase is not a success. This use of text still seems monologic because Jamila is using the words she found in the reading, but she has not yet found a way to comment on them or transition from them. She, as the writer, has no place in this conversation. She is just struggling to report her source.

Glynda Hull and Mike Rose, in "Rethinking Remediation," explore a phenomenon called "patchwriting" which they see as a stage of development, in which students are exploring different ideas but have not absorbed them thoroughly enough to put them into their own words, so they include large "patches" of text from outside sources without paraphrasing. Hull and Rose describe this technique as "mak[ing] slight modifications to the original, changing a word here and there but copying whole chunks verbatim. . . juxtapos[ing] segments of the original without connecting them each to the other" (147).

Some form of patchwriting was used in all five of the research papers I studied. This in not a practice used only by less experienced writers. In fact, Rebecca Moore Howard has suggested that all writers patchwrite, but that some are just more successful at it than others. According to Howard, many students patchwrite because they have no other choice if they are to use their sources and so they "(…) merg[e] their voice with that of the source as a way of collaborating with its language and ideas" (Standing 110-111). Patchwriting helps these writers move closer to the discourse used by the community they are hoping to join. They are unable to determine the appropriate passages from their sources, and so they copy too many words and do what some refer to as a "quotation dump." Howard sees this tendency as,

> a source of reverence. The patchwriter recognizes the profundity of source and strives to join the conversation in which the source participates. To join this conversation, the patchwriter employs the language of the target community. (Standing 7)

However, in this attempt to "employ the language of the target community," the students are unsuccessful. The language is so complex and difficult for many of these students that they fear they are unable to paraphrase it accurately.

In her paper on coming out as a lesbian Amber pieces together several sources without adding any of her own words to direct the essay. Although she uses citations, she avoids using any words to inform the reader that a new voice has entered the conversation. Here is the first half of Amber's third paragraph:

> The second stage Identity Comparison is having the thoughts "I may be a Lesbian". (Jordan 1998 p.43) Acknowledgment of the sexual element is often accompanied by feelings of denial, shame, anxiety and ambivalence. (Lewis 1984 p.465) The conflict between society and family values and wanting intimacy with women can lead to the anxiety, shame and denial. (Lewis 1984 p.465)

Her first sentence in the above excerpt is an attempt of a paraphrase of this sentence from Jordan: "In the second stage, Identity Comparison, the individuals think, 'I may be lesbian/gay' and a sense of alienation and of not belonging in society and family develops" (Jordan and Deluty 43). When Amber "paraphrased" Jordan and Deluty, she simply omitted some words and changed the form of the verb "to think," from "think" to "...having thoughts." This variation shows that Amber was trying to make changes in the original text, but that she did not (or could not) go far enough. Amber exhibited a number of good research and writing choices in the example above. Her sources are helpful, and writing about these stages does a lot for her paper. She also chose good quotations; for example, the terms "anxiety, shame and denial" work well to show the reader how women are feeling during this stage.

Although Amber has chosen good sources and applied them well for her purpose, she does not seem to be in control of the ideas. While a literature review really does not require writers to make clear their own stances toward the material (because that is more likely to be

found in the discussion section), Amber's paper would be clearer if she did something more to introduce these authors and spell out the connections between them. Also, the use of so many sources in such a short excerpt reveals that Amber is really not yet comfortable with this material. She is relying entirely on the words of the experts instead of adapting those words for the purposes of *her* paper. Her deference toward her sources or her understanding of her assignment to bring in those sources has led Amber to rely entirely upon them and to add nothing.

Amber is not always so reticent, however. In her Discussion Section she reflects on the process of doing academic research. She is refreshingly honest about her trouble with her sources.

> The articles used for my research failed to use input from lesbians on a personal level, only surveyed studies/statistics. These studies didn't give you a really good perspective of what it's actually like to come out of the closet. I don't fully disagree with their information but have a few different views. I believe if seen through the eyes of an individual who has actually experienced this process the information would've been clearer. . . (Amber 8)

Although this type of comment is not generally welcomed in a research paper, it provides a golden opportunity for her instructor to understand the frustrations Amber experienced in doing academic research. This excerpt strongly suggests that Amber has not done much of this kind of research in the past and has not come to value the same kinds of empirical research that sociologists and other members of the academic discourse community do. She would feel a lot more comfortable reading articles to which she can relate personally, and she is swayed much more by an emotional argument than by the empirical research that attempts to describe the

experiences of these women in a more scientific or at least generally descriptive way. Many students have the same or a similar concern about their assigned reading. They complain in class that the articles in the academic journals are cold and sterile and that they have nothing to do with their experiences as students or as people. Amber is using the discussion section of her research paper to discuss not only her findings, but how she relates to those findings. Maybe in a later essay she will be able to find a means of expression for her "different ideas." Amber's comments here reveal her to be a thoughtful, aware student and she sees the Discussion section of her research as a place to engage in a discussion or dialog with her sources, she is writing dialogically and will most likely do well in a course where she is encouraged to respond to course readings in personal ways.

Howard, Hull and Rose all say that patchwriting is a stage of growth. It is helpful for many students to use this technique as they start writing at the college level in order to try to understand what the authors of their texts believe and to begin to take on the language of the discourse community. The CSULA students' writing examined in this investigation appears to support this claim. The students apparently were using this technique. These students are new members of this community. They often are uncertain of their roles as authorities on the topics of the research papers they are writing. Although elsewhere in her paper Amber identifies herself as a lesbian/bisexual, she still does not see herself as an authority on the Stages of Disclosure so she relies heavily on her sources to describe the stages. For Amber, at this point in her education, patchwriting is a good strategy. Without relying on patchwriting, she, like many other students, may not have been able to complete the research paper assignment.

Studying the ways students go about incorporating text in their essays not only reveals that they are using strategies like patchwriting but, even more important, that they are

experimenting with text. They are becoming aware of the complexities of language and are developing their own understandings of how to communicate ideas that are new and meaningful. Although it may be distressing for us as instructors to see just how far many students are from writing "academic prose," it also is exciting to see that our students are beginning to do what Bakhtin calls "orient[ing]" themselves towards the words of others in order "to lay down [their] own set[s] of answering words" (Marxism 102). Students need our help to learn how to respond in ways that keep them from being susceptible to accusations of plagiarism.

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